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Luisa Chimenz

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Sacred design. Immaterial values, material culture

Luisa Chimenz^a,

^a Department Architecture and Design, University of Genoa

*luisachimenz@arch.unige.it

Abstract: Religions are something related to God, but played by humans and humans require witnesses of God's presence in their lives. The production of artefacts linked to Religion is something interconnected to our society and the design discipline, beyond borderline boundaries with art and self-production, is the one that shall care of this. Through creativity and matter, design delivers the sign of a holy presence or, at least, it offers a key to the comprehension of our world. The paper would show how the three Religions of the Book, through their design, reveal cultural connections and economical relationships with the land of use and its own habits and heritage, in a cross-cultural process that demonstrates consistently integration and diversification, simultaneously separation and union. Focusing on objects and visual products, the aim of this essay is to widen integration and reciprocal understanding in the next society, through design-driven cultural process.

Keywords: Sacral design, Material culture, Interfaith dialogue, Next society

1. Introduction

Objects, as intended in the form of artefact and products, are outcomes of a relatively young discipline, but with a relevant and articulated history already. For a long time every type of object has been created by craftsmen, from the most common one, like chairs in wood and straw, to the most precious and gorgeous one, like jewels.

For what concerns the belonging of a product to the field of design, art and craftsmanship it is interesting what is observed by Francesco Trabucco, about the antinomies of design:

“The antinomy between art and technic is itself at the roots of occidental culture. In ancient Greek art and technic were expressed with a single word, *techne*, for which indicated both the technical ability, the expertise, both the artefact as an antithesis to the natural fact. This second antinomy is the generalization of the first one: design experiments in its making both the language of art, both the language of technic, where obviously forms has to deal with art and function with technic.”
(Trabucco, 2015, p.65-6)

If what said may finally be accepted and closes the debate around the topic, how are we to evaluate particular objects and products without any apparent function, like the ones for faiths' cult? Meaningfully, if the significances remain, they still cannot deny the belonging to a place and time.

In this sense, it is necessary to start from the anthropological definition of artefacts, because this is most relevant to understand both the specific worth and the absolute one. Nonetheless, the boundary between art, design and craftsmanship has always been transient, in the real constitution of objects styles and artistic movements. Even socio-economical and cultural conditions, have had something to add to the structure of the product itself. In this sense the religious products do not make an exception. As expressed by Eleonora Fiorani:

“Objects, in fact, are structures of a more complex morphology, made of gestures, values, symbols, words, whose interpretation and codification may be a possibility of cultural enhancement and comprehension of the social dynamics.” (Fiorani, 2001, p. 163)

Religions are definitely something related to God, but actually constructed and played by humans, in their day to day lives. For this purpose, objects answer to the request as physical witnesses of God's presence. All of us, believers or not, try to find His/Her manifestation around us, from Nature to human acts and signs: what can be done, in addition, and may make sense of the real presence in lives, as in every human activity, is tangible for the intangible, touchable and affordable. We as consumers-believers necessitate to give shape and matter to God's word and face, answering to an inner need.

The production of artefacts linked to Religion is something interconnected to our society and the design discipline, beyond borderline boundaries with art and self-production, is the one that shall take care of this. Through creativity and matter, design delivers the sign of a holy presence or, at least, it offers a key to the comprehension of our world. It is interesting to refer in this sense to the thought of John Heskett:

“Obviously, the ability of human beings to create meaningful forms spans a very board spectrum of possibilities. At their most profound level, forms can embody metaphysical significance, going beyond the boundaries of tangible form to become symbols of belief and faith, expressing the deepest beliefs and aspiration of humankind. Nothing in the specific form of [...] statues of Buddha or Shiva, or the Christian cross can even hint at the complexity of the beliefs and values they represent.” (Heskett, 2002, p.35)

Focusing on objects and visual products, the aim of this essay is to widen integration and reciprocal understanding in the next society, through design-driven cultural process. The paper will show how the three Religions of the Book, through their design expressions, reveal cultural connections and economical relationships with the land of use and its own habits and heritage, in a cross-cultural process that demonstrates consistent integration and diversification, simultaneous separation and union.

2. Research methodology

The methodology for investigating a product directly or indirectly related to the canons of a Religion has necessarily to be dual, well inserted in its time and space. The reading of the material value, focused on innovation about matter and form, has to be accompanied by an analysis related to the emotional value and the intrinsic signification of the object. This always remains true and valuable, even if the user is not religiously observant, because if an object is even a good design product

doesn't betray its primary function, communication, and still stays independent of external conditions.

Epiphanies of a present time, through forms and matters, signs have from time to time took several garments to please, attract, surprise, create desire, staying true to their original immutable meaning. In respect of what is written and coded, the contemporary designers use their freedom of movement, as it were an 'any' product, or sometimes to accomplish and remain more loyal to original signs they have forced themselves in customs cages, that if from one hand might make design process more complicated, on the other do not exclude nor assure a good outcome of the final result.

2.1 In the right place, at the right time

In a critical and theoretical study regarding the identification of the characteristics of product and visual design for the Three Religions of the Book, motivation of final expression of the symbol have to be researched due to the specific signification of the objects. Within the everyday life contexts, or the ones devoted to conviviality or either for special events during the year, signs and symbols motivate themselves and find a place where they can show their presence, but in addition and at the same time they remain true to their product group, to the world of artefacts they belong to and to the anthropological and cultural meanings.

Assuming, therefore, that we are talking about products because, even if handmade or produced for a tiny series, they have as a proof a design and a usability, how to take into consideration all those objects that actually don't have a real function?

Symbols related to religions, often erroneously perceived as immutable, convey all the cultural background of their time and at the same time they state anthropologically all the values they are incorporated with: high values connected to the Sacred co-exist, not always without clashing with much more worldly values, related to economical status and social class. Likewise, as it has always happened and we can guess it will always be, objects in their material manifestation narrate also of the refinement and the choices of those who preferred them in the wide panorama of goods, even as stated by Bernhard E. Bürdek:

“The things of nature talk to us, those created artificially we make them talk: they narrate how they were born, which technologies have been used, which cultural context they come from. They narrate thus even something about those who uses them, their lifestyle, the actual or pretended affinity with a social group, and their system of values” (cfr. Bürdek, 2008, p. 285).

The pivotal point of the topic is in the double membership: on one side, symbols of transcendent and its material significations, whose evocative and emotional value yearn for cringing definitely from the economical one; on the other side objects and artefacts, anyhow and in every case, to affirm their strength have to be highly communicative and desirable, because they shall justify the production and the vending even in case of absence of a real consumption. In fact, is it adequate to consider usage and fruition in the case of a rosary, of *mezuzah*¹ or a *tasbeih*²?

¹ The *mezuzah* is a case, fixed to the right door's jamb or side, containing a scroll with two passages from the Torah. The observant touches when entering and recites the prayer; it is one of the most designed object in Jewish sacred design (Judaica), as an art object both in the contemporary and modern era. Cfr: Gugenheim, E. (2007) *L'ebraismo nella vita quotidiana* [Judaism in everyday life]. Florence: Casa Editrice Giuntina, p.183.

² The *tasbeih* o *tasbīh*, that can be named differently according to the region and the land, is a tool for praying to be hold in one hand. It might have 33+1 grains in its narrow form or 99+1 in the complete one, it allows the observant to pray repeating the ninety-nine “Holy Names of Allah” or it might be used to recite passages from the Qur'an.

As understood from the reading of Daniel Belasco, there is an undeniable pleasure given by pursuing in rituals, with the warm effect of routine:

“Ritual has made a comeback of late. After decades (indeed, centuries) of denigration in the West as behaviour that is hopelessly stereo-typed, formulaic, repetitive, and largely boring, after unceasing put-down as rote action that stifles creativity and innovation, or as legalism that inhibits genuine feeling, or as mere “ritualism” that stands in the way of true human relationship and blocks the way to authentic encounter with God - after all of that, we found ourselves at a moment when ritual is once again receiving its due as an essential element of culture.” (Belasco, 2009, p. XI).

The *menorah* created by Gyula Pap in the Bauhaus Metalwork Laboratory, in 1939, shows doubtless the characteristics of ritual Jewish candleholder, as it has seven arms to hold candles, but is entirely different and far from the *Dachshund Menorah* created by Jonathan Adler, in 2010, with its specific and funny design: one is representative of the thought of the Bauhaus School, in its pureness of shape and adherence to function; the other expresses the philosophy of the designer devoted to bringing ‘happy chic’ as he says in (everybody’s) life. This is probably more comprehensible if we consider the words of Daniel Belasco

“The Jewish people have always been international and multicultural. Their art, specifically the design of the ritual objects known as Judaica, reflects a dynamic interchange between local cultures and Jewish symbolism, narrative and law. The expression is varied as art history itself [...]. Judaica’s diversity and hybridity have prevented it from being assimilated into standard critical models. Yet this feature is what makes Judaica exciting and relevant in today’s global culture.” (Belasco in Hemachandra, 2010, p.6)

Thus as seen, the objects shall be considered in their belonging to the world of design: they show that they are made to be sold and used. According to John Heskett:

“The term object is used to describe a huge spectrum three-dimensional artefacts encountered in everyday activities in such context as the home, public spaces, work, schools, places of entertainment, and transport system. [...] Some are expression of human fantasy, others of high technology. Objects are a crucial expression of ideas of how we could or should live, put into tangible form. As such they communicate with an immediacy and directness that is not just visual, but can involve other senses.” (Heskett, 2002, p.37)

Do they lose their significance or their sacred attitude since being made with industrial production? Accordingly comes another of the nodal intentions of this research: thinking further, or contemporarily, to expected results in their last expected form, the aim is to obtain a visual catalogue, a narrative defined by the high impact of design illustration and visualization, without a fixed target, that can lead everybody to appreciate sacral design objects as witnesses of a particular and very singular form of materiality.

Doubtlessly, a high-impact picturing, specific of what relates to Design’s outcomes, both physical and visual products, supports well-exposed argumentations better than a thousand words. In fact, as reported by Bernhard E. Bürdek, in the design process:

“The designer doesn’t have to send to the world – as in traditional models – a sort of message, that has to be understood by the potential receiver in the future. In these communicative processes it is more important to let interrelation arise, thus reciprocal relations. These communications must be generated from the analysis of cultural contexts of the products, of the forms of life and of behaviours, so to be

comprehended, classified and appreciated by prospective users. According to this perspective, design must formulate and create identifications, that might be efficient at different levels; the products, in these process, work as vehicles of social interaction, offer a wide variety of forthcoming connections”(cfr. Bürdek, 2008, p. 292).

It is now evident how through the display of artefacts, in different configuration according to the setting, might be communicated their intrinsic worth and cultural heritage, even maybe easier to be enjoyed, because of its availability, and also to be transformed and offered in always new and cool arrangements, thanks to the use of new technologies, such as web, applications for smartphones, cultural platforms and digital books.

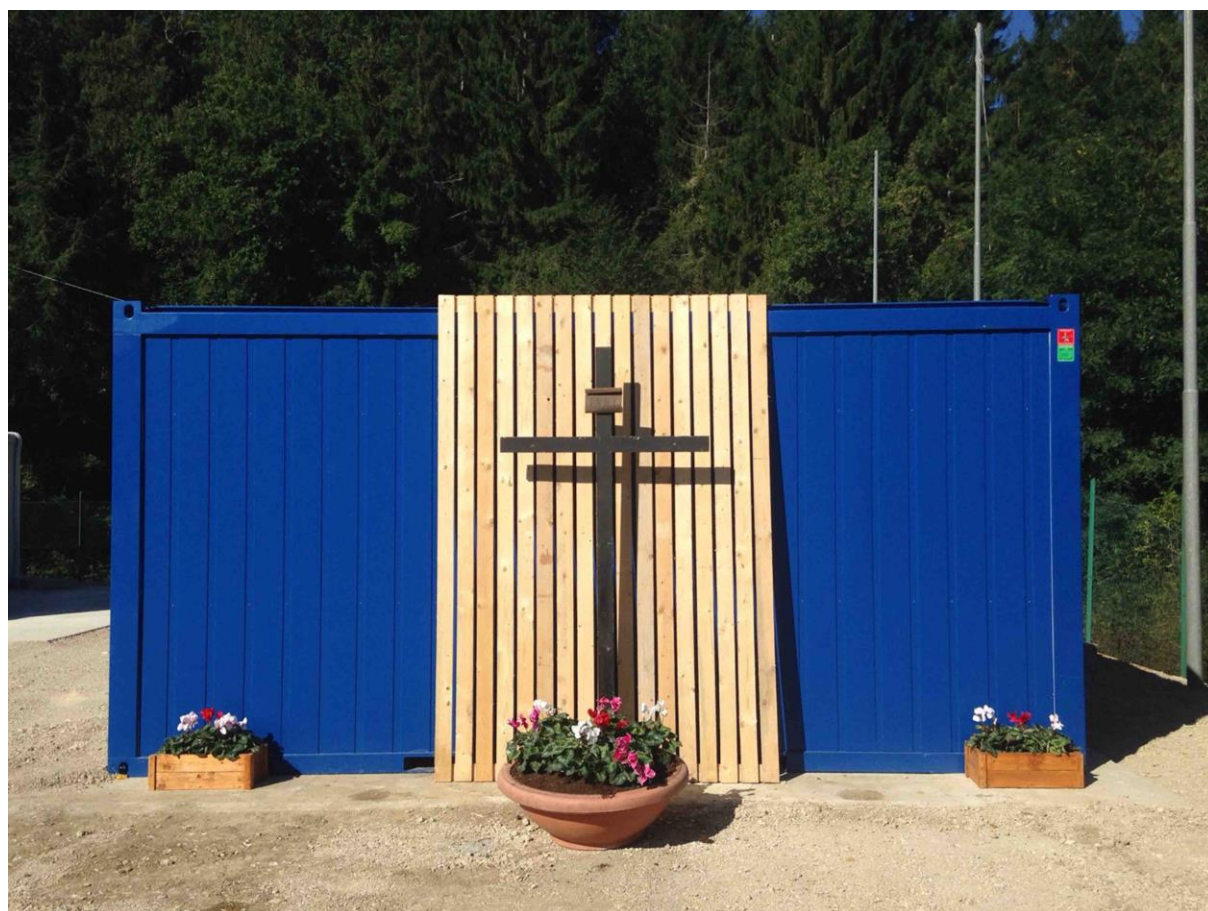


Figure 1. Church in a container, Montegallo, Italy; ph. Marco Iachetta (2016, October) [digital image]. Civil Protection built a Cittadella for offering services like the town-hall, the post-office, the church damaged by the earthquake occurred in Italy on August 24th. The structure serves for religious purposes as well as a meeting-hall for the local community, or as a dormitory e.g. for the earthquakes occurred on October 27th and 30th.

2.2 Out of the comfort zone

The essay means to focus the observation on the interrelation between object's production and its adherence, or not, to the traditions, always considering as inevitable the cultural and religious requirements.

If the requirements, in fact, determine consistency and material structure, they do not deny possibilities of expression and design, and these have produced, over time, innovative and remarkable solutions. The research topic arises from the interest upon the multi-faced expressions of material culture, in particular when related to intangible values: the theme of the object in tradition

related to Religion, because of its wide investigation in Art history but not yet in Design looks significantly interesting from the academic point of view. In the end, it happens to sacral objects the same meaningful design process described by John Heskett for any other type of design:

“Within the framework [...] on the interplay between designers’ and users’ concerns, it is clear that there are some designers who, on balance, are more preoccupied with their own ideas, rather than with those of their users. [...] In other words, it is the meaning of a product, rather than uses to which it is put, that is the criterion in its conception and use. It is not users, however who are the focus of the concepts, but designer, which opens the door to products taking on arbitrary forms that may little or nothing to do with use, but are justified by ‘meaning’. “(Heskett, 2002, p.38)

Given as certain, a semiotic meaning of these artefacts, and clearly experienced their significance encoded in sacred texts, the formal definition, the material choices, the insertion in a cultural and social framework are without any possible doubt a design matter.

The objects of material religion are, beyond religious importance and contextually to the specific connotation of the sign for an observant, part of the designer’s personal narrative, tangible expression of cultural background and thoughts, meaning, even if unrequested, a temporal and geographical belonging. At the same time, they reveal the demands of the brand and the overall commitments, the wishes of future users, the needs and the expectations of the public.

In essence, in respect of what is written and coded designers and brands have used and use their creativity in the design and production processes as if sacral objects were ‘any’ product. Researches have been done and new solutions have been studied; the outcomes relate themselves or they definitely break their relation with Design History and traditions, enhancing themselves in a process of critical and gentle addition, mediated by necessity and respect. The keys of reading of functional, formal and material innovation can demonstrate adherence or distance from the outcomes reached in the past. Very often, in the present time, the introduction of ICT and digital tools, add accessibility and usability: this occurs, for example, with the digitalization of the Qur’an and the Torah.

On the other side, religious characterization isn’t a constriction and products may follow logics borrowed from other sectors, in which they have proved to be successful. In this sense, the truly Italian experience of style, expands itself in respect of forms and religious prescriptions, in an evolution process of material and immaterial values, formal and functional qualities. As they trivially were objects, and at the same time expressing themselves in accordance to their specific nature, modern and contemporary artefacts linked to the three monotheistic religions, are indissolubly harmonized to their *when* and *where*. Still remaining contextually adherent to dictates and direction, they innovate substantially because they allow contemporaneity to permeate. They diverge if compared to other religions because of being extremely typical. They converse with the whole society, to communicate and serve at the same time. They amuse, in the end, as said by Eleonora Fiorani: “through the functional spectacularization they redeem the obviousness of purpose, they break the instrumental irrelevance and the anonymity of style.” (Fiorani, 2001, p.168) Devotion, culture and pleasure follow, because all this *is* a design matter, even as stated by what has been treated in a design course in Berlin University of the Arts:

“Sacral objects have extremely varied uses and meanings in world religions. They have evolved over time to their strictly defined present-day forms. The development of sacral objects has been largely left to craftsmen, with little critical exposition by designers. Hence the results are often ornamental adaptations of legacy objects that reflect a period of time. A more critical eye on the function of

different religious objects is a timely topic for designers to engage with beyond a pure artisanship.” (Heller; Talarico, 2009, p. 60)

Therefore, another primary aim of the research appears: the formulation of an observation conducted by following an innovative approach, searching case studies in History, but presenting them contemplating the membership to defined classes, can produce the opportunity for further acknowledgement and valorisation.

Which objects have to be treated is last, in the research structure, but not least. Many people, in fact, know very little or almost nothing about other’s religion habits and rituals and we can guess a discrete number is curious and desires to know more, whilst even to better understand our changing society. This research aims to describe moments of everyday life through objects in their final form, but with a contemporary twist. Far from a sentimental and sympathetic narrative visualization, objects and visual products shall focus the attention on themselves becoming first players and stars in the scenario.

Everybody can reach comprehension and knowledge, if the samples are illustrated like pieces of furniture and of product design, as currently this is a trend for design’s message in books and on the web, even because in the contemporary era, design and its specific way of communication is everywhere, and everybody seems to be trained to talk it over.



Figure 2. Elan Leor and Eran Lederman, Nail Mezuzah, 2008; ph. Eran Lederman (2016, November 23) Nail Mezuzah in Matta, Israel [digital image]. From the description of the project by the designer: “The fixation of the mezuzah marks the final chord in building a home and marking its Jewish ownership. This mezuzah wishes to extend this dimension”.

3. Conclusions

Material culture lets all of us know, comprehend and join in, requiring just a glance or little interest and no effort at all. The strong visualization, typical of design books and catalogues is attractive to

everyone and might introduce a new and widened point of view, in different contexts and places, far from our comfort zone, obtaining great impact and positive effects.

From the Wiener Werkstätte production to the Australian-based designer of *burkini*, the designers in modern and contemporary eras have reached the purpose to allow users being themselves, in their countries, with their personal identities in their social communities and, eventually, with their religious beliefs.

Artefacts and products can narrate stories or might, modestly, be just objects. The meanings that are them assigned to are simply given by *adjectivation* and *objectification*.

Adjectivation first: products connected directly to one or more aspects of the beliefs of the three main monotheistic religions get 'sense' as long as they state a belonging, a specific moment of the year or of the day, a gist of rituality, a credo and an idea literally precise, sometimes even a specification of the age and the gender of the owner or of the user. Considered apart they, undoubtedly, still preserve their formal features but might, however, loose their high functional worth and the relevant emotional connotations in them incorporated. While keeping their aesthetic purport, they remain, if separated by faith's reasons that generated them, emptied of their intrinsic signification and deprived of their reason for being?

And hence, a primary possible answer in *objectification*: objects are objects, products, artefacts, in the sense that their position is antinomian to the subject.

Designers, producers, users, observers are the players whilst objects themselves are subjects and, at the same time, attributes of the religion that generated them and maybe much more. Therefore, nevertheless possessed, studied or even designed from non-religious or observant creators, sacred objects directly linked to the faith or the products contextually related to religious prescription, never neglect in any way their existential dimension. Too wide is the context in which they are inserted and too valuable from the cultural point of view their origins, for which they cannot be deprived of their intrinsic significances in any way. As observed by John Heskett:

"Yet the significance of [...] symbols becomes regarded as an objective social fact, understood by all who share the beliefs they symbolize. At the same time, it is also possible for people to invest objects with intense personal meaning that need not conflict with broader patterns of beliefs in a culture "(Heskett, 2002, p.35).

In *objectification* all design history, and the issues linked to modernity and contemporaneity, interweave to unchangeable values, making them independent from a directly relevant indirect *adjectivation*, immanent symbols of transcendent. The material dimension, even if unchained from the connoted sign, doesn't fail and as a bystander of a time and a moment, of an idea and a production remains worthy of interest and attention. As said by Eleonora Fiorani,

"The objects become symbolic are messengers of translated meanings and tend to go through a metamorphosis in signs, in forms of value and communication. And in particular with the lost of references, an object imposes itself and lasts for its evocative strength, for its ability to communicate, for its potential of new information and its capacity for the reinvestment of the sense of the world."(Fiorani, 2001, p.117)

Consequently, if the *objectification* is always true to itself, the product never loses its significance, because this arises even neglecting its specific *adjectivation*, however direct or indirect could it be. The artefact's *objectification* as a teller of the present time and of the society that generated it, but either and above all as a cultural active subject, immense like the Religion to whom it unconditionally belongs, makes it always a participant of a daily process of spiritual enrichment and of a tension to

dialogue. In this sense, sacral design products, even if not belonging to our personal religion, have a prominent role in enhancing cultural spreading and reciprocal comprehension.



Figure 3. Multi-faith and contemplation room, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom; ph. Luisa Chimenz (2016, June 22) [digital image]. As a sign of open-mindedness need in the contemporary, culture goes along with respect and beliefs, demonstrating the possibility of co-existing.

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About the Authors:

Luisa Chimenz, architect, PhD, collaborates since 2010 within the Department of Architecture and Design (DAD), University of Genoa, where she teaches *Design history*. Researches are focused on the design role and its impact on communities, in two paths: design for extreme events and disaster challenges mitigation and the relation between religious related object and material culture.

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